

THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY:

A

DISCOURSE

PREACHED IN THE

FEDERAL STREET MEETINGHOUSE IN BOSTON,

ON

SUNDAY, JUNE 8, 1856.

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DISCOURSE.

ISAIAH, LIX. 1, 2.

THE LORD'S HAND IS NOT SHORTENED, THAT IT CANNOT SAVE; NEITHER HIS
EAR HEAVY, THAT IT CANNOT HEAR: BUT YOUR INIQUITIES HAVE SEPARATED
BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR GOD.

THERE are times when speech is a duty, and times when silence is a virtue. There are times when, if one gives expression to the feeling with which his heart is burthened, he will be moved to say what his cooler judgment might not approve; and times when the calmest judgment forbids a suppression of the indignant or sorrowful feeling with which the breast labors. When we met here a fortnight ago, I was glad that the solemnities of the approaching week suggested a topic which drew our thoughts away from the painful facts of which it might then have been difficult to speak without transgressing the boundaries of Christian discussion. And, on the last Sunday, the associations to which we are accustomed to yield ourselves kept our view fixed on the great

Sufferer. Through these two weeks, the facts to which I allude have lost none of their mournful significance, although the intense feeling which they at first excited may have settled into a more deliberate estimation of their character. It seems to me, that at this moment a voice should come from the sanctuaries of religion, addressing itself to the exigencies of the period. If only political interests were imperilled or involved, the sanctuaries of religion should not be disturbed by the intrusion of themes foreign from the purpose to which they are devoted. But, in the present state of our country, every interest dear to man, — the progress of civilization, the well-being of society, the fundamental principles of righteousness, the vital elements of character, the reality of moral distinctions, the meaning of life; all that the pulpit is erected to explain or enforce; the value of the gospel as a law, and its efficacy as an influence, — all these are brought within the scope of the inquiry now on every one's lips, What shall be done? That question does not simply ask, What shall patriots do? or what shall republicans do? or what shall Americans do? using these, not as party names, but in their better and broader sense. It compels us to consider what Christians should do. And to this inquiry, drawing its proper answer from the Bible and the gospel, I reply, Repent and pray. This is the time to think of God; the time to humble ourselves before Him, for we all need his forgiveness; the time to

seek from Him the wisdom and the help which He alone can give, and without which I see in the future only a history that it makes one sick at heart to regard as even possible.

It ought not, perhaps, to surprise us, that, under the exasperation of feeling which no one is ashamed to confess, so little has been said of our dependence on God; a dependence which, as we look backward, must remind us of obligation that no neglect of ours can annul, and, as we look onward, opens to us the only trust to which we can retreat from our fears. Yet is not our perilous condition a result which we have induced? The present is but the maturity of the past; and, if shame and anxiety fill our hearts, while the cloud of the Divine displeasure hangs over our country, it is "our iniquities that have separated between us and our God." When the apprehension of imminent evils drives us to consider what methods of relief or security we can adopt, shall we rely on human strength, and forget that "the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear"? In all which has proceeded from the tongues or pens of the North within this fortnight, that has come under my eye, I have seen nothing in which I have felt a more hearty concurrence than in what was said by the minister of the Mount Vernon church, on the last Sunday afternoon. If one or another sentence in that discourse might be amended, its purpose and tone claim more than com-

mendation, — they invite imitation ; and if I can lead you, my friends, to the same exercises of penitence and prayer to which it was his desire to conduct his hearers, I shall speak as I ought at this time.

I anticipate the admonition, not to trespass on party ground. The preacher should not lead his congregation through the turbid waters of political strife, it is said : and I both accept and approve the restriction. But is it not one of the most lamentable errors into which a people can fall, that they refuse to take such subjects as demand our present consideration out of the warfare of temporary interests ? What ! questions that lay hold on the first principles of personal duty and social order ; questions that relate to the very existence of liberty, and the preservation of government, — those mutually suggestive ideas and mutually dependent facts ; questions that embrace great moral issues ; — to be treated as mere portions of party policy, and be dragged from their majestic importance to become the materials out of which ambition shall construct the steps by which it may climb to eminence ! No, no ! Upon such questions, the people should disown all ties but those which bind them to justice and honor. There should be no consent of a party to the commission of crime, or the perpetration of outrage. Any party should be ashamed of complicity with brutal violence ; every man should hasten to disclaim sympathy with an assault on the safeguards of freedom and the rights of

humanity. We go behind the divisions which preference for this or that man, or this or that measure, creates, to the truths on which the institutions that we all value rest as their only support, when we call upon our hearers to discountenance the substitution of injury for argument, or of brute force for legal restraint.

The party spirit which is so rife in this country, and which falls like a mildew on every generous impulse, while it puts fetters on all independent action, stands in the double relation of effect and cause to a yet greater evil under which we suffer; far greater, because it is the most disastrous of all evils, whether for an individual or for a community to cherish. I mean the banishment of moral and religious convictions from practical life. We are not practically a Christian nation, nor even a nation of theists. Though not guilty of an open denial of God, yet, in the primitive sense of the word, as "without God in the world," we are atheists. While avoiding a direct avowal of infidelity, we treat both Christian rules and Christian sentiments with a neglect that is equivalent to unbelief. Especially does this disregard of the considerations by which the mind should be governed appear in our political action. How few bring their decision upon the support they shall give or refuse to a measure of the government, or to a candidate for office, under the light which faith in any thing above or beyond this world would throw upon it!

Because the Church neither receives the patronage of the State nor attempts to control the State by any direct action, it seems to be thought that the Church and the State have nothing in common; as if the truths which have built up the one were not the basis of the other. Every question that enters into the history of civil government has a moral and religious side. Does a war with England, or with any country, cast its gigantic shadow over our future prosperity? The statesman or the private citizen, who, in forming his opinion upon the propriety of such a conflict of national forces, leaves out of view the antagonism between war and the spirit of the gospel, omits the most important element of a correct judgment. Is the extension of Slavery beyond the bounds within which its noxious influence is now felt, attempted? That any one may determine upon the right course for him to pursue in reference to this subject, he must take into account the effects of such an institution upon the character alike of the master and of the slave. Are the use of deadly weapons, and a resort to dastardly violence, encouraged by the example of men holding seats in the national Legislature? The morality of the land, surely, is not bound to keep silence, lest it should meddle with matters that do not lie within its province; for what amidst all the forms of human wickedness may be exposed by the religious teacher, if such conduct must pass without his rebuke? Even if it were true that the ordi-

nary business of government has no religious connections, whenever selfishness and passion become dominant influences, when the sanctity of law is contemned and the essential rights of freemen are invaded, when rapine and murder are the methods used to adjust political differences, the Christian who does not speak in behalf of righteousness is disloyal to his Master. There are some offences which, as they do not admit of palliation, forbid silence. We may lament the introduction into Congressional debate of a style of personal recrimination as ill suited to any good end, as it is inconsistent with Senatorial dignity; but no discourtesy of the tongue can excuse the arm lifted with a deliberate purpose of vengeance. The want of moral and religious principle in those who are the chosen guardians of the public interests should humble us to the dust; for they represent either the sentiment or the negligence of the people, without whose active or passive consent such men could not have the opportunity of abusing high trusts. The political profligacy of the times falls back upon the people, as the authors of the downward course which we are treading. There is too little fear of God in their hearts, and too little love of righteousness. A nation cannot prosper which denies to moral considerations their proper influence over public affairs.

The tendencies which are manifesting themselves among us cannot but be unfavorable to the conti-

nuance of our free institutions. These institutions are not in themselves immortal, nor inaccessible to harm. They are not made of adamant or granite; their strength lies in the character of the people. Nothing can endanger their stability more than the indulgence, on the one hand, of ambitious, selfish, and violent tempers within the present boundaries of the republic; or, on the other hand, an enlargement of our territory without regard to the justice of the acquisition or to the previous condition of those whom such enlargement may bring into the Union. An insane passion for unlimited growth is tempting us to place both our external and our internal relations in jeopardy. We are greedy of success, and, if not unscrupulous, are impatient in regard to the means. We thirst for dominion, and covet the exercise of an influence that may bring us into collision with the Powers of the Old World; instead of enjoying the immunity from European jealousies and conflicts which our situation might afford us. We abound in self-conceit, and claim an admiration to which we show ourselves but poorly entitled. We are growing passionate, turbulent, savage, profane. With all the expense that is lavished on education, and all the benevolent agencies that are established, we are losing refinement of manners, disparaging intellectual culture, fostering habits of extravagance, countenancing luxury and display, and precipitating ourselves upon a change in our moral condition which

must materially affect our political state. Virtue and piety are the defences of popular government. Let them be broken down, and the best constructed system of organized liberty will be precarious. It can last but a little time without justice towards man and faith towards God.

One effect of the example which we are now presenting is, to discredit the theory of our institutions abroad. In the Divine providence, the experiment of intrusting a people with the task and risk and glory of self-government was committed to us for the instruction of the world. Never was such a responsible position held by a people before; never such an opportunity enjoyed of benefiting mankind. Through the years of our weakness and youth, while we fell into some mistakes, we on the whole sustained the burthen, which it was an honor to bear, with dignity and success. Gradually the contempt of the old despotisms was turned into respect or fear, the hopes of those who sighed for emancipation from tyranny in Europe were inflamed by admiration of our career, the infant republic took its place among the great Powers of the earth; and moderation and discretion alone were needed to have made our history a light that would have guided the Eastern continent into the enjoyment of constitutional liberty, if not of republican government. But with our prosperity we became self-sufficient, immoral, and reckless. In the spectacle which our public affairs have offered to

the nations, they have beheld a retrograde civilization. Our boasted superiority is sinking into a fierce lawlessness; our legislation has become unprincipled, our policy grown rapacious; our prominent men distinguish themselves by acts that would be disreputable in private life; the institution which, at the commencement of our Union, though a palpable contradiction of the fundamental principle of our political order, was permitted to remain because its decay was thought to be sure and to be safer than its immediate eradication, has increased in visible magnitude, and still more in secret influence, till it overshadows the whole land; violence stalks through the chambers of the capitol, and civil war is already enkindled on the borders of the republic; — and what must now be the effect of our example abroad, but to fill the hearts of good men with disappointment, and to animate the supporters of monarchical and aristocratical institutions with proud exultation? Why should they not exult? They see enough to dispel the fears that were once inspired as they looked across the Atlantic, and are waiting for our downfall to read a lesson on the inefficiency of popular government, which centuries may not erase from the memories of men. O my country! how unwise, how unfaithful, hast thou been!

The effect upon ourselves of our misuse of the position in which we were placed, as a people with whom liberty and law should have been co-ordinate

terms, is seen in the loosened morality which pervades the land. Look into our cities, and you find a luxuriance of vice such as indicates a rich soil left without the care that might have made it productive of the most substantial harvest. From the villages which were once the seats of Puritanic propriety we receive painful intelligence of crime, besides many a tale that marks a want of religious restraint. The great West heaves with its excess of life, suspended as it were between a magnificent destiny and an ignoble materialism. Polygamy has planted its homes in the fertile plains that were an unknown region a few years ago, and Paganism has erected its altars of idolatrous worship on the shores of the Pacific. Honest and able men prefer the retirement of private life, to an exposure of character and person amidst the vulgar passions that infest the scenes of public duty; and, worse than all, the people are losing their faith in freedom, in goodness, and in God. Life is becoming a scramble for outward success; politics are given over to unworthy management; and, unless some check be provided, the future pages of our history will describe the decadence and fall of the noblest structure ever raised by human hands.

In this picture of national disaster, one circumstance is especially suited to create gloomy apprehension. The country is divided on a question of sectional interest. In former times, the division has been kept more or less clear of this fearful issue. Now it is

brought to a direct struggle between the North and the South. One or the other must yield. Each says it has made all the concession it will make; each speaks of the injustice it has received in the past, and spreads its angry menace over the future. I am not now considering which of these antagonists has right or strength on its side. Each believes it has both strength and right. What, to human view, must follow but open contention, — the arbitrament of the battle-field? I know that it is common at the North to deride the threats of the South, as an attempt at intimidation, which will be relinquished the moment it shall fail of its purpose. But they who reason in this manner forget that pride and passion do not take counsel of sound judgment. The South will not pause to calculate consequences. When what it calls its honor is assailed, and what it holds to be its chief interest is endangered, it will prefer defeat to submission. The history of the world has been written in vain, if it do not teach us that men will fight rather than yield, though the chances of success be all against them. The temper of the South is desperate, as well as arrogant. The leaders of opinion there may be few, but determination does not wait to count numbers.

What, then, is before us? Perhaps a civil war, the first spark of which, struck in a territory but yesterday unsettled, may wrap the whole country in its fiery surges. Are we prepared for this? Some there

are who answer, Yes, let it come; and others who say, It never will come. To the latter I reply, Your confidence may be misplaced; and to the former, Your decision betrays more of impetuosity than of thoughtfulness. Have you remembered how much war always causes of suffering and sin? Have you considered that no war is so internecine, because no hatred is so intense, as that in which former friends are arrayed as enemies? Have you anticipated the miseries that must ensue, for years and years, when fraternal relations shall have been converted, by an enforced peace, into smothered but burning desires for revenge? Have you brought before your imagination the world's discouragement, when this fair heritage of constitutional freedom shall have been drenched in fratricidal blood? "Bombastic extravagance," may be the only reply that some persons will give. Not so, my friends. Not a word in the sentences I have just spoken goes beyond the inevitable truth. I ask the Christian to ponder well his meaning, when he talks of bloodshed as if it were but a display of military lines on our Common. War is the last resort of civilized man, if it should ever be the means adopted by a Christian people for the maintenance of their rights. I do not say, that, in the final extremity, whether for an individual, or a nation, or the oppressed part of a nation, self-defence, though through blood, is not a duty; but it then derives its justification from the irresistible instincts of our nature. The bold talk

about fighting before the awful necessity comes, and thousands of miles from the scene of peril, has a very different sound from that voice which speaks only in the last emergency. I read with sadness the language of Christian men and Christian ministers, whose brave words, if they be well considered, are bloody words. To me, the musket and the Bible do not seem twin implements of civilization.

With or without war, the tempers which now present their hostile fronts to each other may, and if not in some way or other appeased must, sunder the Union. Well, say many who a few years ago would not even listen to a suggestion so painful, that is not the greatest of evils. I admit it is not. I admit that we may be driven to this as the part of the alternative, which alone we can take and keep clear consciences before God and man. But I do affirm, — and every one who thinks soberly will agree with me, — that this will be a lamentable conclusion of a history, the first chapter of which is bright with the names of Washington and his compeers. The dissolution of this Union of States may not be the greatest of evils, but is it not next to the greatest? Is it not an evil which we should deprecate, and to prevent which we should be ready to sacrifice every thing but truth and right? I cannot think of such a termination of American freedom without tears that the heart weeps, if they do not flow down the cheeks. It is easy to flout at such emotion, and easier still, but not

more kind nor more honorable, to represent such feeling as sympathy with the slaveholder ; but no wish to avoid misrepresentation so gratuitous and unjust shall deter me from confessing, that I can contemplate the overthrow of this Union only with fear and grief. Let the alternative involved in the relations of Slavery to the Union be brought before me under circumstances which compel me, if I cling to the one, to encourage the other, and I shall know that God has called me to the sad duty of helping to destroy the citadel of the world's hope. But, till I see that duty too plain to be mistaken, I will pray that it may not be made the test of my submission to a solemn and dark Providence.

Shall we, then, give way to despair, or indolently wait for the Divine will to be unfolded in events whose purpose we cannot misapprehend? No. That is not the counsel of a believing or a patriotic heart, of one who loves freedom, or whose "hope is in the Lord." Never may we despair, when the great interests of humanity are at stake ; never doubt that a way will be opened for the success of just principles and the preservation of good institutions. Be watchful to detect the first sign of duty, and ready to obey the first call to action that shall come from a higher wisdom than that of man. Be patient till the hour comes ; be prompt when it comes ; be firm while it lasts.

It has come, I am told. I know not but it has. I

do believe that we are in a more critical situation than ever before since our present form of government was inaugurated. But I think, that if the hour of final decision had come, we should see, more clearly than we now see, what we must do. The country is agitated, perplexed, distressed. At such a time, our trust must be, not in man, but in God; the light that shall illuminate our path must be sent from Above. This is the time for humble and penitent thought, for deep searching of the spirit within us rather than for passionate declamation, for earnest calmness rather than for superficial vehemence. Never was there a time when self-control was more important, difficult though it be; never a time, when one should be more studious that his speech be just as well as frank. This is no time for fraudulent words, and no time for rash acts. If in a single sentence now uttered I have departed from the gravity of a most momentous theme, I have been false to my purpose. I have wished, my friends, to show you the urgency of the requisition, which, in view of the fearful possibilities with which we are encompassed, enjoins upon us serious and deliberate preparation for whatever a day or a year may bring forth. Let every one be in earnest, and let every one feel the solemnity of the period. God grant that when our injured Senator shall return to the seat whence he was stricken down by a cowardly blow, and the country shall wait in eager solicitude for his vindication of the rights of free speech

and the privileges of Congressional debate, while by his manly eloquence he shall awaken shame and remorse in hearts that need to feel such pangs, he may say nothing which the severest wisdom shall not approve! God grant that the persecuted citizens of Kansas may not forget, that, if self-defence be a law of nature, retaliation is a breach of the gospel! God give us all, the discernment and the determination which the exigency demands!

God give them to us, I say; for from Him alone can we receive the light or the support which we need. To Him must we look. His "arm is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear." Human counsel at a time like this is insufficient. It is poor and impotent. To God must we turn, in sorrow and in faith; to the God of our fathers, to Him who has been our God through all the past, to Him who will never leave us without assistance if we ask for it. He may have permitted us to be surrounded by these anxieties, that we might feel our helplessness and turn to Him. This is the time for lowly and importunate prayer. Better than the crowded hall is the closet of secret supplication; wiser than the noisy assembly, the devout congregation. There need not be less of bravery because there is more of piety, less of righteous indignation because there is more of humble confession, nor less love of freedom because there is more reliance on God. Prayer should be on all our lips, and in all our

hearts. There should be personal intercession and united petition. We should pray for our rulers, for our legislators, for our fellow-citizens, for ourselves. We should cast our country upon the Divine care, which will not refuse to accept the burthen. O my God ! guide us, help us, save us, for the sake of that loving-kindness which Thou didst show to our fathers, and for the sake of that compassion which Thou hast for all thy creatures. Forgive the sins which we have committed, and grant us true repentance. Dispel the darkness that overhangs, and remove the fears that beset us. Allay the jealousies and subdue the animosities that separate us from Thee, as well as from one another. Let freedom and peace and union be the watchwords of the whole land, while the people shall walk together in the obedience of thy commandments and under the protection of thy holy name. Hear this our prayer, for thy great mercy's sake ! Amen.